Chapter 1 Operation URGENT FURY: Grenada

In 1983, the United States led a military operation in Grenada to restore a viable Grenadian government. This operation, URGENT FURY, came about as a response to a request by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). Cuban military units had established fortifications, arms caches, and military communications facilities on Grenada (1:3). The OECS became concerned that the political institutions in place represented a threat to the security of the region.

Objectives

Two key objectives of URGENT FURY were the evacuation of US medical students along with any others who wanted to leave and the evacuation of Governor General Sir Paul Scoon.

Logistics Considerations

To meet the objectives for this operation, many different areas of logistics had to be identified and planned. One requirement was to decide how to secure the airport and identify what would be needed to do this. Questions to be answered included: how many men would be needed, and what type of equipment, ammunition, and support would they need?

American medical students board a C-141 for evacuation from Granada. (Official US Navy photo)

The other major requirement was to determine how to locate, protect, and extract the students efficiently. Considerations included the type of airlift, food for the students, and any prisoners of war that might be taken. Answers to the above issues would determine what assets and supplies would be brought to the island. Another logistics challenge was coordinating the roles of the Services involved. The Air Force, Navy, Army, and Marines all had missions to perform in this operation. Each service had its own logistics problems to handle. The joint nature of this operation required extensive logistics coordination.

During the morning of the first day of the conflict, Army Rangers secured an airfield at Point Salines. This was the only runway that could accommodate a C-141.

The runway was still under construction at that time. A large number of troops and corresponding supplies needed to be brought through this one airfield and only one large aircraft could be handled at a time. This required an extremely fast turnaround time to unload and get the plane airborne again. During the early part of the operation, ground support would turn around the aircraft within 30 minutes (2:4). The first troops on the scene brought the equipment needed to off-load the aircraft that would be following. These people needed to determine where to store the off-loaded cargo so it could be accessed when needed without impeding the use of the landing strip.

Constraints

The operation experienced many logistics constraints. Three examples were limited airfield capacity, fuel resources, and potable water.

Getting the necessary supplies to the theater was difficult (3:59). Each service requested strategic airlift directly from the Military Airlift Command. No single command coordinated and prioritized the airflow based on operational need. Due to limited runway capability, landings were made on a first-come, first-served basis, with the amount of fuel on board dictating an aircraft's status in the queue. Some aircraft carrying essential logistics supplies were diverted to other airfields for refueling, which meant there was a continuous competition for access to the airfield. The lack of a prioritization system meant the same shipment could be bumped multiple times, and there was no way to accurately predict when critical supplies would arrive.

US servicemen gather their gear after landing at Port Salines in Granada. (Official US Air Force photo)

This confusion could have been avoided if the existing logistics doctrine had been followed. The existing doctrine would have had all airlift requirements forwarded to the Atlantic Command J-4. Thus, all the requests could have been reviewed and validated prior to going on to the Military Airlift Command. A priority order could have been developed which rescheduled less critical flights (3:59).

The airfuel reserves located at Seawall International Airport in Barbados were rapidly depleted by airlift refueling. This forced a change in airlift operations. Maximum allowable cargo payload was reduced from 50,000 to 35,000 pounds to enable aircraft to make the round trip from stateside locations without having to refuel (3:59).

The island of Grenada did not have a large supply of potable water. Intelligence received on this logistics issue proved inaccurate. It was initially thought that water would be readily available. However, the fresh water supply was low and to complicate the matter, the water system at St. George was rendered inoperable early in the conflict. Water was resupplied by air until desalinization units arrived and were put into operation.

Logistics Successes

The Deployable Mobility Execution System (DMES) was used to support the operation. This portable software application was designed to allow a load planner to process materiel needed to be airlifted to the theater based on its weights and dimensions. The system was intended to save deployment of aircraft by more effectively loading the C-141s being used (4:10). DMES allowed planners to build the most efficient load plans based on lists of equipment and personnel required. In one instance the planning was accomplished in 20 minutes and saved the use of one aircraft by loading all of the required materiel on only four planes instead of the anticipated five aircraft. DMES was used to plan for the airlift of nearly 7,200 short tons of cargo and over 7,500 troops to Grenada (5:10+). The use of this software also allowed planners to quickly change loading plans to accommodate the dynamic priority lists that came from field commanders.

A Forward Area Support Team (FAST) was deployed to support the forces. Since maintenance would be required from the beginning of the operation, the FAST was to coordinate the early maintenance problems and help to solve them quickly. They established an operation located at Salines airfield. Their duties were to set up a facility to collect requests for spare parts from all sources until the Division Material Management Center (DMMC) would arrive. The FAST would collect the requests and forward them to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, via the Tactical Satellite (TACSAT) or facsimile machine. Once the main body of DMMC personnel set up, all requests would go through them so they could use the information available through the TACSAT and Rear DMMC to find the most expeditious method of getting the parts (2:6).

Lessons Learned

The issue of joint logistics was not given proper consideration during the planning stage of Operation URGENT FURY. Each service addressed logistics planning autonomously, which made transferring supplies across service boundaries a formidable task. There was no single ground commander coordinating logistics efforts which resulted in a duplication of effort and competition for scarce resources between the individual Services.

Even though Operation URGENT FURY was an overall success, the operation revealed some logistics limitations. This influenced the Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, which placed new emphasis on joint assignments and gave combatant commanders authority in all aspects of logistics. New joint exercise programs were also implemented to improve joint logistics (3:62).

Operation URGENT FURY highlighted the advantages of conducting an operation with bases already located in the theater. The use of a large secure runway was a tremendous benefit. In addition, the large number of troops already stationed in Grenada and intelligence about the opposition facilitated easier implementation of logistics plans. These factors need to be considered when applying the lessons learned from this operation.

References

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